DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 196 CS 211 290

AUTHOR Riffe, Daniel; And Others
TITLE Black State Legislators Describe Their Relationships with the Local Press: A Preliminary Report.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988). Major funding for this research was provided by San Diego State University.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Attitudes; *Black Leadership; *Legislators; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; Press Opinion; Racial Bias; *State Officials
IDENTIFIERS *Local Media

ABSTRACT

Representing the earliest findings in an ongoing national survey examining how black elected officials view the community press, 113 black state senators and legislators (33% response rate) from 50 states were surveyed using five-point Likert-type items with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Mean respondent age was 49 and education level was 21 years. Results indicated that the lawmakers were polarized in their response to the question of whether the community newspaper was a help or a hindrance to their objectives as public officials. In addition, most respondents were neutral in responses to the question of whether they viewed the reporters assigned to them as adversary, supporter, friend, or opponent. More than half of the officials agreed that assigning a black reporter to the lawmaker's office would help the newspaper understand black issues and concerns. Overall, findings suggest that the black state legislator has an unfavorable view of local paper performance, with most seeing the community press as obsessed with conflict coverage. The hometown paper's coverage of the lawmaker's office was judged as particularly poor compared to statehouse specialist reporters. Few black legislators in the 1980s feel fairly treated, and they feel that whites have more influence at the community newspaper and receive more favorable news coverage. (Eighteen notes and three tables of data are attached.) (ARH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED295196

MINORITIES AND COMMUNICATION DIVISION

Black State Legislators Describe Their Relationships With the Local Press: A Preliminary Report

by

Daniel Riffe
The University of Alabama

Donald Sneed
San Diego State University

Roger L. Van Ommeren
South Dakota State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Daniel Riffe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Major funding for this research was provided by San Diego State University.

CS211290

Black State Legislators Describe Their Relationships With the Local Press: A Preliminary Report

How do black state legislators view the community press? This is a preliminary descriptive report of a national survey designed to answer that question. We anticipate an answer of, "It depends," because the black lawmaker's relationship with the press has several dimensions that merit exploration.

On the one hand, the state senator or representative who is black is by office a member of "the system" to a reporter, and some lawmaker-reporter relationships have the adversary nature described in normative press theories.[1] However, some official relationships are more cozy,[2] with many approximating a form of symbiosis,[3] wherein the press's need for news also serves a lawmaker's need for a vehicle for presenting himself to the public[4] in order "to build electoral constituencies, to test reactions to policies and to mobilize program support."[5] And newspaper editors and publishers are often members of the same community power stratum as the elected leaders the paper covers.[6]

But on the other hand, even these simple "obstacle vs. vehicle" or "combat vs. cozy cooperation" distinctions are compounded by the fact that the black legislator is representing and seeking resources, legitimacy and viability for a minority.[7] The Joint Center for Political Studies reported that blacks, though they comprise about 11% of the U.S. population, hold fewer than 1.5% of elected offices.[8] Within this minority-majority perspective, concern shifts from determining the press's posture or role (adversary, vehicle, etc.), to whether the majority press is fair to the minority.

The Kerner Commission condemned the 60s white press for failing to present fairly blacks and black concerns as legitimate; implicitly, black leadership had also been ignored.[9] How has the press responded?

Contrasting coverage of blacks between 1950 and 1980, Martindale concluded that, "Increased attention to news concerning blacks even after the events of

the civil rights movement subsided may suggest that the movement, and perhaps also the hiring of more minority reporters, made the papers' managements more aware of the concerns of black Americans."[10]

But Chaudhary in the late 70s argued that, "Black elected officials are increasingly complaining about harassment and the lack of positive coverage by the media." In 19 dailies' 1970-77 coverage, Chaudhary found that stories on black leaders, though generally longer than stories on white leaders, presented blacks negatively and were placed in less desirable locations.[11]

Reviewing studies from the 70s and the early 80s, Martindale noted that, though researchers found "more, and more even-handed, media coverage of blacks," some criticism remained that news coverage was nonetheless "inadequate, unrepresentative and unfavorable."[12]

One consequence of the unfair press described by Chaudhary is no doubt frustration, anger and heightened anti-press sentiment or adversarity among black leaders. But on the other hand, one consequence of the sensitization of the white press described by Martindale might be a lessening of the adversary relationship for some members of the press.

Indeed, Dates and Gandy suggest that "fear of appearing racist or insensitive" explained press treatment of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's run for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination. "Sensitized by persistent complaints from their critics that they openly discriminated against minorities or systematically ignored them," the press was gentle with Jackson until the dual watersheds of the "Hymie" incident and Jackson's association with the Rev. Louis Farrakhan made it "acceptable for the press to remove its 'kid gloves' and treat Jackson more like other candidates."[13]

The discussion above, hardly comprehensive,[14] nonetheless supports our basic premise that a black lawmaker's views of the press should be conceptualized as multidimensional or, at minimum, as more complex than some

"watchdog-lapdog" cliches demand.

Different roles influence relations with the press and, of course, views of that relationship. The relationship between a black lawmaker and the press is not exclusively a reporter-news source relationship (whether "watchdog-adversary" or symbiotic) nor exclusively a black-white relationship, nor exclusively a conflict.

In exploring the black legislator's relations with the press, then, we need to consider both official and personal dimensions; the more traditional dimensions of "press as 'adversary'" and "press as 'vehicle'"; and the majority-racial minority dimension.

This report describes data on how black legislators view their relationship with the press, using several measures designed to explore dimensions or aspects of that relationship.

Method

Descriptive findings and conclusions from the data reported here are meant to be suggestive, because they are the "earliest returns" in an ongoing national survey of over 2,000 black elected officials in different offices at different levels of government (state senators and legislators; mayors; and members of school boards). When the survey is completed, we hope to test empirically the validity of the dimensions hypothesized above.

We planned to survey the 387 black state senators and legislators in the 50 states.[15] But because of a death, undeliverable ("address unknown") questionnaires, and roster errors (many had left office), the working population was pared to 343. Thus far, questionnaires have been received from 33% (113), a low rate by most standards, but one familiar in studies of lawmakers who may at the time of mailing be at the home office, "on the stump," or in the capital; who may be in- or out-of-session; and who have staffs that tend to intercept mail

questionnaires.

Five-point Likert-type items with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" were used, though we here combine "Strongly Agree" with "Agree," and "Strongly Disagree" with "Disagree."

Findings and Discussion

Mean respondent age was 49 and education level nearly 21 years (a majority had some graduate school). The number of blacks elected to office grows yearly, and this sample's "youthfulness" was evident in legislative committee responsibilities: 85% served on three or more committees, but a majority (52%) chaired no committees, and 10% chaired more than one. Only one respondent was not a Democrat, and for three-fourths, party identification was "Strong" or "Very Strong."

Geographically, the sample underrepresents slightly the number of black legislators in the Deep South (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi), but does not differ significantly from the population.[16]

Table One profiles a black state legislator with little regard for the local paper. Only a third of the respondents think the paper is "interested in disseminating favorable news" about the lawmaker's activities, while 86% describe the press as "interested in reporting controversy."

But despite viewing the press as conflict-oriented, not all the lawmakers were willing to univocally brand the community newspaper an "obstacle." In fact, when asked whether the community press had "helped" or "hindered" in accomplishing their "objectives as a public official," nearly as many respondents agreed with "hindered" as agreed with "helped." Respondents' polarization on this dimension is indexed by the significant negative correlation between the items (Pearson's $r = -0.42$, $p<.001$).

Asked which labels (adversary, supporter, friend, opponent) describe reporters assigned them, respondents were surprisingly neutral. Nearly a third

agreed the reporter was "an adversary," and only 19% agreed the reporter was "a friend." But 40%-56% provided neutral, midpoint responses ("neither agree nor disagree"). While some lawmakers simply do not consider a reporter in such terms (a fourth of respondents did not complete these items), personal relations with members of the press may also be situational (i.e., sometimes an adversary, sometimes not; sometimes a friend, sometimes not).

But despite this neutrality, between-item correlations suggest a basic "friend or foe" dimension for some lawmakers: agreement on "adversaries" was significantly correlated with agreement on "opponents" ($r = 0.51$, $p<.001$); and "friends" was significantly correlated with "supporters" ($r = 0.80$, $p<.0001$).[17] But the correlations of each of the two "friend" labels with each of the two "foe" labels were significant and negative, averaging -0.50.

Respondents were also queried on the quality of press coverage of their office, and asked to compare the community newspaper with statehouse reporters. The lawmakers generally rated press performance poor, and some saw their relationship with their hometown newspaper as particularly problematic. Under half agreed the community paper was doing "a good job" covering "state government," and only 30% agreed it did "a good job in providing news coverage" of them (the two items were negatively and significantly correlated; $r = -0.56$, $p<.001$). A majority (56%) agreed that statehouse reporters provide better coverage than do hometown reporters.

Table Two presents respondent views on the fairness of press coverage, focusing particularly on their treatment as blacks. Overall, the lawmakers felt they fared poorly.

Fewer than a third agreed they received "fair and accurate commentary" from opinion columnists, a complaint that could be voiced by many elected officials. More important, two-thirds agreed that the paper did not provide "fair and

balanced" news coverage "without regard to race."

When black lawmakers were asked to compare their and their white counterparts' treatment in the press, however, the community newspaper suffered most. Eight of ten agreed they had less "influence" at the community newspaper than white elected officials. And three-fourths agreed that the paper covered black and white officials differently, with whites receiving "more favorable news coverage." These three items contrasting the paper's treatment of black and white officials were consistent; between-item correlations were 0.67, 0.61, and 0.81, all significant beyond the .001 level.

By contrast, only 40% believed that belonging to the publisher's political party would enhance one's news coverage.

Nonetheless, the lawmakers were comparatively mild in rating individual reporters assigned to cover them, with 59% agreeing reporters were "fair," 50% agreeing they were "accurate," and 41% agreeing they were "biased." Note also that the black legislators, who had been so neutral in evaluating reporters' roles--as adversaries, supporters, etc.--were far more willing to judge reporters' fairness, accuracy and bias. Correlations among the three items were significant (-0.45, -0.53, and 0.82, $p < .001$).

What would improve the newspaper's performance? Table Three presents lawmaker views on several possibilities--some perhaps unworkable, others reminiscent of Kerner Commission recommendations.

In the greatest show of unanimity in the survey, 92% agreed the paper should routinely contact black elected officials, as well as black leaders "in education, religion, business and other fields on a regular basis," in order to better serve black readers. Nine of ten thought hiring black reporters would help the paper "get a better understanding of matters of interest to black readers," with three-fourths advocating hiring black editors. But only one in five believed "a specific page for news about blacks" would be useful.

What about the lawmaker's own press relations? Over half agreed that assigning a black reporter to the lawmaker's office would help the newspaper understand black issues and concerns. Agreement waned, however, on items that would increase a "vehicle" role of the press: 45% believed understanding would be gained by the paper's publishing "stories from interviews with me more often," and only 30% believed a regular column by the lawmaker would improve the paper's coverage of black concerns.

Conclusions

While we sought in this study to describe black legislators' views of the press, we also wanted to consider the dimensionality or nature of that relationship--were we asking the right kinds of questions about it?

The items discussed above were grouped on the basis of an a priori conceptual distinction, in terms of what press role should be and in terms of fairness of minority treatment. Although the correlations suggest the basic conceptual distinction may be valid, we need large-sample factor analyses to explore further the dimensions, their interrelationships, etc.

Nonetheless, the apparently non-racial but anticipated "obstacle-vehicle," dimension did emerge, with black legislators split into two camps. Half agreed that "at times" the community press blocked their efforts, while half judged the press as having helped them attain goals.

A parallel "adversary-supporter" dimension emerged in the lawmakers' views of individual reporters covering them. Though some black legislators were uncomfortable with the labels, 60% called reporters "fair," half called them "accurate," and 40% described them as "biased."

How does this personal-level dimension correlate with the institutional dimension suggested by the items on "helping" and "hindering" by the local press? Again, future analyses may answer the question.

Friend or foe, though, the black state legislator has overall an unfavorable view of local paper performance, with most seeing the community press as obsessed with conflict coverage. The hometown paper's coverage of the lawmaker's office was judged as particularly poor compared to statehouse specialist reporters.

It is on the anticipated black-white or majority-minority dimension that the lawmakers were most in agreement and the community press fared most poorly.

Few black legislators in the 80s feel fairly treated, whether in opinion or news columns. They feel they are denied "fair and balanced" news coverage, while they see whites as having more "influence" at the community newspaper and receiving "more favorable news coverage."

These are the same points raised by the Kerner Commission in the 60s. And Chaudhary reported similar complaints among black leadership in the 70s.

What should be done? What should have been done?

Few lawmakers believe blacks should have a separate news page for black news. The lawmakers believe, though, that the newspaper should do many of the things Kerner did suggest: increase contact with black elected officials and other black leaders "in education, religion, business and other fields on a regular basis"; and hire more black reporters and editors.

These hiring or personnel suggestions might, if implemented, generate an increase in black news. Increasing the black presence among news media personnel remains an important goal. Increased contact with black leaders might also yield more coverage.

But some evidence suggests that increasing the press's attention and increasing the volume of coverage--given the press's propensity for the negative and controversial--are not always the same as providing more favorable coverage.[18]

Or "fair" coverage.

While some concerns of black elected officials about treatment in the press may be remedied through an increase in the volume of black news brought about through reassignment of staffers, or through hiring of black "liaisons" to the news staff, it seems that the black lawmaker's primary concern--fairness of press treatment compared to white counterparts--may be a problem that defies solution through such simple personnel decisions.

Notes

1. See, generally: Theodore Peterson, Jay W. Jensen and William L. Rivers, The Mass Media and Modern Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965). Bernard Cohen discusses neutral and advocate normative roles in The Press and Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), while Douglass Cater focuses upon an adversary's role in The Fourth Branch of Government (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959). More recently, see Hugh M. Culbertson, "Three Perspectives on American Journalism," Journalism Monographs, No. 83 (June 1983). Finally, for a view of the adversary relationship from "the other side," see Robert W. O'Donnell, "What's Wrong with the Media's Coverage of the Legislature," State Legislatures, October 1985, pp. 29-30.

2. For example, see: Walter Gieber and Walter Johnson, "The City Hall 'Beat'," Journalism Quarterly, 38:289-297 (1961); Cohen (1963) op. cit.; Delmer Dunn, Public Officials and the Press (Reading, MA: Addison-Westley, 1969b), and "Symbiosis: Congress and the Press," in Robert O. Blanchard (ed.) Congress and the News Media (New York: Hastings House, 1974) p. 243; Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973); Susan H. Miller, "Reporters and Congressmen: Living in Symbiosis," Journalism Monographs, No. 53 (January 1978); Fay Lomax Cook et al., "Media and Agenda-Setting: Effects on the Public, Interest Group Leaders, Policy Makers, and Policy," Public Opinion Quarterly, 47:16-35 (1983).; and Fred Fico, "How Lawmakers Use Reporters: Differences in Specialization and Goals," Journalism Quarterly, 61:793-800, 821 (1984a); and "The Ultimate Spokesman Revisited: Media Visibility of State Lawmakers," Journalism Quarterly, 61:383-391 (1984b).

3. Dunn, op. cit., and Miller, op. cit. were apparently the first to use the term to describe newsmakers' and reporters' mutually beneficial interaction.

4. See: William A. Taggart and Robert F. Durant, "Home Style of a U.S. Senator: A Longitudinal Analysis," Legislative Studies Quarterly, 10:489-504 (1985);

Malcolm E. Jewell, "Legislator-Constituency Relations and the Representative Process," Legislative Studies Quarterly, 8:303-337 (1983); Malcolm E. Jewell, Representation in State Legislatures (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982); Heinz Eulau and Paul D. Karps, "The Puzzle of Representation: Specifying Components of Responsiveness," Legislative Studies Quarterly, 2:223-254 (1977); and Richard F. Fenno, Jr., Home Style: House Members in Their Districts (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

5. Fico (1984a), op. cit.

6. See: Robert K. Thorp, "Media Gatekeepers and Community Power Structure," paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism, Syracuse, 1965; Lewis Donohew, "Publishers and Their 'Influence' Groups," Journalism Quarterly, 42:112-113 (Spring 1965); and G.A. Donohue, C.N. Olien and P.J. Tichenor, "Leader and Editor Views of Role of Press in Community Development," Journalism Quarterly, 62:367-372 (Summer 1985).

7. For provocative exploration of the concepts of minority legitimacy and viability, see: Pamela Shoemaker, "Deviance of Political Groups and Media Treatment," Journalism Quarterly, 61:66-75 (Spring 1984); Shoemaker, "Political Group Viability as Predictor of Media Attitudes," Journalism Quarterly, 61:889-892 (Winter 1984); and Shoemaker and J. Douglas Storey, "'Deviance' as a Predictor of Political Groups' Attitudes Toward the Media," paper presented at the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research conference, Chicago, 1983.

8. "Black Elected Officials Show 4.1% Rise in Year," Associated Press, The Tuscaloosa News, Nov. 9, 1987, p. 3; and "Mississippi Blacks Have Made Great Strides Since 1960s," Associated Press, Birmingham Post-Herald, Jan. 5,1987.

9. Kerner Commission, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968).

10. Carolyn Martindale, "Coverage of Black Americans in Five Newspapers Since

1950," Journalism Quarterly, 62:321-328, 436 (Summer 1985), particularly p. 328.

11. Anju G. Chaudhary, "Press Portrayal of Black Officials," Journalism Quarterly, 57:636-641 (Winter 1980), particularly pp. 636 and 641..

12. Martindale, op. cit., p. 322.

13. Jannette Lake Dates and Oscar H. Gandy Jr., "How Ideological Constraints Affected Coverage of the Jesse Jackson Campaign," Journalism Quarterly, 62:595-600, 625 (Autumn 1985).

14. In fact, the lawmaker's relationship with the press has also been explored from the perspective of the legislator's using the press to monitor constituency concerns. Delmer D. Dunn provided the first systematic approach to what he called, "the possibility that the press may serve as a source of information for officials," and not just their adversary, in his examination of a small group of Wisconsin elected officials, "Differences Among Public Officials in Their Reliance on the Press for Information," Social Sciences Quarterly, 49:829-839 (1969a). See, more recently: Daniel Riffe, "Comparison of Media and Other Sources of Information for Alabama Legislators," Journalism Quarterly, 65:46-53 (Spring 1988, in press).

15. Black Elected Officials: A National Roster 1986, Fifteenth Edition (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1986).

16. Ibid., and see Footnote 8 supra. When sample proportions representing the South, the East, the Midwest and the West are compared to the population representation of these regions, chi-square is 2.21 with 3 d.f. ($p = 0.56$).

17. Riffe, op. cit., has shown important distinctions between official and personal sources of influence upon lawmakers.

18. Given widely held "news values" and the press's orientation toward conflict, controversy, etc., simply increasing the volume of coverage or amount of press attention will hardly remedy--and will likely aggravate--any imbalances in coverage of a group, or a nation. See: Daniel Riffe and Eugene F. Shaw,

"Conflict and Consonance: Coverage of Third World in Two U.S. Papers," Journalism Quarterly, 59:617-626 (Summer 1982); and Jyotika Ramaprasad and Daniel Riffe, "Effect of U.S.-India Relations on New York Times Coverage," Journalism Quarterly, 64:537-543, 663 (Summer-Autumn 1987).

TABLE ONE

Adversary, Objective or Cooperative Relationship:
Black State Legislators' Views of the Local Press

	% Agree[a]	% Disagree	mean[b]
My community newspaper is interested in reporting favorable news about the public office I hold.	33	41	3.2
My community newspaper is interested in reporting controversy involving the public office I hold.	86	6	1.8
At times, my community newspaper has hindered me in reaching my objectives as a public official.	45	27	2.7
At times, my community newspaper has helped me in reaching my objectives as a public official.	47	27	2.8
The reporter I deal with at my community newspaper can be described as:			
An adversary	32	28	2.9
A supporter	23	24	3.1
A friend	19	25	3.1
An opponent	23	31	3.0
My community newspaper does a good job in providing news about state government.	47	26	2.7
My community newspaper does a good job in providing news coverage of the public office I hold.	30	47	3.3
State capitol reporters generally do a better job of providing news coverage about my public office than do reporters at my community newspaper.	56	24	2.5

(n of cases ranges from 77 to 113)

[a] "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses have been combined, and "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" responses have been combined.

[b] The lower the mean, the greater the agreement with the statement.

TABLE TWO

Is the Local Press Fair to Public Officials?
Black Legislators' Views of the Press

	% Agree[a]	% Disagree	mean[b]
Local opinion columnists who write for my community newspaper present fair and accurate commentary about my public office.	29	44	3.3
My community newspaper provides fair and balanced coverage without regard to race to news concerning blacks involved in public office.	23	64	3.6
Some white elected officials have more influence with my community newspaper than I do.	80	6	1.8
There is a difference in the way my community newspaper covers news about white elected and black elected officials.	77	10	2.0
In general, white elected officials receive more favorable news coverage in my community newspapers than do black officials.	75	11	2.0
An elected official who is a member of the same political party as the publisher of my community newspaper has a better chance of getting news coverage than someone of a different party.	39	19	2.7
The reporter I deal with at my community newspaper can be described as:			
Fair	59	22	2.6
Accurate	50	24	2.7
Biased	41	32	2.8

(n of cases ranges from 77 to 113)

[a] "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses have been combined, and "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" responses have been combined.

[b] The lower the mean the greater the agreement with the statement.

TABLE THREE

How Can the Local Press Improve?
Black State Legislators' Views

	% Agree[a]	% Disagree	mean[b]
My community newspaper would get a better understanding of matters of interest to black readers if it:			
contacted black elected officials on a regular basis.	92	2	1.6
contacted black community leaders in education, religion, business and other fields on a regular basis.	92	1	1.6
hired more black news reporters.	89	1	1.6
hired a black editor.	73	5	1.9
created a specific page for news about blacks.	22	48	3.3
published stories from interviews with me more often.	45	13	2.6
allowed me to write a regular column.	30	21	2.8
My community newspaper could do a better job of reporting news about the public office I hold by assigning a black reporter to cover my office.	58	11	2.3

(n of cases ranges from 103 to 113)

[a] "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses have been combined, and "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" responses have been combined.

[b] The lower the mean, the greater the agreement with the statement.